

THE STUDY OF MAN

GERMAN HISTORIANS' VERDICT ON HITLER

This Time No "Stab-in-the-Back"

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ONE of the gravest dangers faced by democratic elements in Germany in 1945 was the possible revival of a Hitler myth. Would another revisionist school of historians arise as in 1920, again attempting to prove that Germany had not only been wantonly attacked, but also criminally cheated of victory? Once more an alleged stab in the back by traitorous elements at home might be the national alibi for the defeat of a "successful" army in the field: Nazism would be white-washed, and the way opened for its restoration.

In eight years since Germany's unconditional surrender, the country is once more being built up, and many nationalist and quasi-open neo-Nazi movements of all kinds have sprung up east of the Rhine. Nevertheless, no major revisionist history has appeared there, nor any theory devised to absolve the Nazi government of war guilt and create another stab-in-the-back legend. Considering the utter catastrophe which overwhelmed the Reich in 1945, a débâcle compared to which the defeat of 1918

and the Treaty of Versailles seem mild, this phenomenon is remarkable, and possibly encouraging.

The works of such contemporary German writers as Jürgen Thorwald, Walter Görlitz, and Herbert A. Quint* demonstrate this development, and evidence that, in spite of all the neo-nationalist and neo-Nazi activity in West Germany, there has been no serious revival of the Hitler cult. All three squarely meet the problem of the *Führer's* contribution to German history and unhesitatingly arrive at a devastating verdict.

The man whom they had been taught to revere for twelve long years, to whom millions had sworn a "holy" oath as soldiers, and for whom they had sacrificed so much, failed them utterly in the end. The demi-god revealed himself to be a very fallible as well as wicked and wanton mortal. It became painfully obvious that he had not even been interested fundamentally in the welfare of the Fatherland, but primarily in his own survival and power. He had failed to find a solution that could save the Reich from complete disaster; and he had added insult to injury by asserting that the

H. L. TREFOUSSE here reviews a collection of books on the Second World War recently published in Germany, with a view to discovering whether fears of the rise of a new "stab-in-the-back" myth in which Hitler and his Nazi gang might be absolved of responsibility for Germany's cataclysmic defeat are justified. Mr. Tréfousse was born in Germany in 1921, came to this country at the age of fifteen, and received the B.A. degree from the College of the City of New York and the Ph.D. degree in history from Columbia University. He is an instructor in history at Brooklyn College, and the author of *Germany and American Neutrality, 1939-41*, published in 1951.

*Jürgen Thorwald, *Es begann an der Weichsel*, Stuttgart, Steingruben Verlag, 1950, 372 pp.

Jürgen Thorwald, *Das Ende an der Elbe*, Stuttgart, Steingruben Verlag, 1950, 426 pp.

Jürgen Thorwald, *Die ungeklärten Fälle*, Stuttgart, Steingruben Verlag, 1950, 254 pp.

Jürgen Thorwald, editor, Joachim Schultz, *Die letzten 30 Tage*, Stuttgart, Steingruben Verlag, 1951, 132 pp.

Herbert A. Quint, *Die Wendepunkte des Krieges*, Stuttgart, Steingruben Verlag, 1950, 260 pp.

Walter Görlitz, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg, 1939-1945*, Volume II, Stuttgart, Steingruben Verlag, 1952, 624 pp.

German people did not deserve to survive it they could not win *his* war for him.

In sum, these German authors lay the blame for the Third Reich's collapse on Hitler's profound irresponsibility and ultimate and abysmal incompetence in the self-assumed roles of warlord and statesman, a realization inescapable to all serious students of the last period of the war. After their sweeping indictment, it will prove extremely difficult for any neo-Nazi to find some scapegoat to rehabilitate the "Führer."

ALL three writers are quite specific in their condemnation of Hitler. From the military point of view, Görlitz and Thorwald emphasize his blundering strategic moves in 1944 and 1945. His orders to defend every inch of ground, his unwillingness to consent to the most reasonable and necessary withdrawals, and his demand that every occupied town be held as a fortress regardless of its relation to the main battleline, made any real effort at defense impossible. His insistence on keeping an army group in Latvia after the Russians had already penetrated into the Reich itself offers the most glaring example of his callous indifference to the fate of the inhabitants of Germany.

A second count in the indictment of Hitler in his irrational hatred of the German General Staff. Always wary of the army, already suspicious of its leaders after the failure to take Moscow in the late autumn of 1941, he became obsessed with resentment against the military after the attempt on his life of July 20, 1944. He seriously crippled the Nazi war effort by his fears, vindictiveness, and personnel policies. His insistence upon faith in ultimate victory made any reasonable planning within the limits of concrete possibilities high treason, and German military and political leadership, in Hitler's hands, became increasingly divorced from reality.

Last but not least, Hitler stands accused, in the eyes of his own followers, of failure to seek a political escape from the calamities of defeat—an escape Nazi and other Germans felt could be found by exploiting the strains and stresses of the "strange" alliance between the Communist East and the democratic West. According to this view, Germany should have gradually given way on her Western front from 1944 on. By concentrating her forces against the Russians instead, she would have been able to halt them. The United States and Great

Britain would then have been faced with the task of occupying a country no longer in arms against them. Stalin would have become suspicious, and the fondest hope of many Germans—a head-on collision between their two groups of enemies—might have been fulfilled.

Here, however, the criticism is not so well grounded. The obvious fact that Hitler and his entourage hoped for the very same thing should be kept more clearly in mind by those Germans who still, in retrospect, support this line of reasoning. Willingly perhaps, they forget how horrified the world was by their regime. Nor do they give sufficient weight to the additional fact that the Western powers were prepared to go to almost any length to appease Russia as long as Japan remained undefeated. On the contrary, they feel that Hitler's "refusal" to make a deal with the West delivered millions of Germans into the hands of the Russian invader.

PERHAPS even more significant is the fact that there are German historians, by no means pro-Allied and certainly not pro-Communist, who are prepared to go much further. Not only do they blame Hitler for his failure to win the war, and for the follies that brought on the collapse; they also call him to account for starting the conflict in the first place. Herbert Quint, for example, asserts unequivocally that that rash step constituted Hitler's most fatal mistake. This conclusion is especially remarkable in view of the fact that it is contained in a book primarily devoted to "crucial turning points" of the war, the very incidents in which some Germans have tried to find the "real" reason for their country's defeat.

Quint blames Hitler for failing to exploit to the limit his strategic advantage at Dunkirk, thereby enabling the British to save their army. He also blames him for not sending Rommel enough arms or supplies for the conquest of Egypt; for not sufficiently encouraging scientific research, thus permitting the Allies to stumble upon radar first; for strategic blunders in Russia in 1941; and for irresponsible tactics in face of the Allied invasion in 1944. But Quint makes it quite clear that none of these isolated instances, singly or together, caused Germany's downfall. That, he maintains, was the result of Hitler's initial defiance of political and military reality by beginning a war that was as unnecessary as it was foolhardy.

It is heartening to know that postwar German historians have found the true cause for

their country's predicament: its criminal and irresponsible leadership from 1933 to 1945. If this point can be made to stick, German democracy will have gained an important advantage over its detractors, and these three authors will have merited the gratitude of the West.

YET, if responsible Germans have not hesitated to accept Hitler's guilt for war and defeat, it must not be assumed that they have shown themselves ready to rewrite their entire history. On the contrary, their very readiness to accept Hitler as the chief culprit has made it comparatively easy for them to absolve almost all his collaborators, with the possible exception of the inner core of the Nazi party. In this way, a great many generals and government officials have been rehabilitated as valiant defenders of the Fatherland against its foes both at the front and in the Chancellory. This thesis, however vulnerable to the facts, has real dangers.

The evil nature of the Nazi regime had been revealed long before the outbreak of the war. It was clearly expressed in the party program and in *Mein Kampf*; atrocities against Jews and other opponents of the regime began in 1933, and concentration camps antedated by many years the attack upon Poland. Those who still harbored doubts should have had their eyes opened by the murders of Schleicher, Roehm, and almost a thousand others in June 1934; Hitler's ruthlessness and utter disregard of commonly accepted standards of morality were clearly exposed in that "incident." It is hard, at least for non-Germans, to see how any of the people—like Engineer Todt, for example—whom Quint describes as drawn to Hitler for purely "idealistic" reasons were unable to discover his betrayal of their ideals until 1943 at the earliest.

The three writers at hand generally disregard these factors. Writing chiefly for a German public, they want to flatter German national pride, and this endeavor is greatly simplified by their blanket rejection of Hitler, who takes on something of the role of a scapegoat for all German sins. Especially does their emphasis upon him as the chief agent of ruin enable them to save, and even enhance, the reputations of the other German leaders who collaborated with him in success if not in defeat.

One of the ways this is done is by stressing the theme of the "crusade" against Bolshevism—and it is here that we may be well advised

to watch for the feared, dangerous whitewash of Nazi monstrosity. The atrocities committed by the advancing Red soldiers are described in such gruesome detail as to make the reeling Nazi armies appear as the last defenders of Western civilization against the onslaught of barbarian hordes; German commanders are made to look like knights in shining armor struggling valiantly for a noble cause against superhuman odds, misunderstood by the West and betrayed by their own criminal overlord. This brazen picture of the Nazi armies going down to defeat as last-ditch defenders of morality and civilization is transparently false; yet it is probable that most Germans will be fully convinced that such was indeed the role of their soldiers during the Second World War.

Once this line of reasoning is followed, the perpetrators of the attempted *coup* of July 20, 1944 against Hitler, are placed in a most unfavorable light. Von Rundstedt and Guderian tend to emerge as the heroes, instead of von Witzleben and von Stauffenberg—true, not because they supported Hitler; but on the grounds that they considered the defense of the Fatherland more important than the removal of its suicidal dictator. Even the obvious military folly of resistance to the bitter end, long after all hope of averting total defeat had vanished, can be excused in this way. After all, could von Rundstedt and Guderian have been expected to surrender to Russians? Thus the Western powers are made to appear as utter simpletons, unable or unwilling to realize the seriousness of the Red peril. Görlitz is especially bitter about President Roosevelt's attempts to appease Stalin, and condemns severely General Eisenhower's refusal to grant special armistice terms to the German army in order to enable it to escape Red captivity.

THUS the horrors of the Russian invasion of Germany, and the consequent emergence of Communism as a threat to the free world equal to Hitler's, offer the possibility for the emergence of a new myth justifying, to some extent, Germany's role in the war. The anti-Communist line taken by most West German writers is sure to strike a responsive chord in the West as the increasingly heavy burden of the cold war leads some people to wonder whether we really gained anything from victory over Hitler with Stalin's aid. A few feel that the Communists today constitute a greater menace to Western civilization than the Nazis did

in 1939, and they deplore what they call Roosevelt's naivety in supporting the former in order to destroy the latter. The Third Reich, it is said, served as a bulwark against Bolshevism: the West's destruction of that bulwark brought about the perilous situation in which it now finds itself.

Three recent German books, Jürgen Thorwald's *Whom They Wish to Destroy*, Peter Kleist's *Between Hitler and Stalin*, and Heinz Guderian's *Memories of a Soldier** concern themselves with this theme either directly or indirectly. The authors take the position that the German army was the defender of European civilization against Soviet barbarism—a barbarism which now threatens to envelop the entire world. They castigate the West for its failure to comprehend this and at the same time to recognize the true implications of the expansion of Soviet power. All three writers complain that the Allied policy of unconditional surrender rendered any negotiated peace with the West impossible, and they say that this, in effect, made the Anglo-Saxon powers accomplices of Soviet barbarism in Eastern Germany.

General Guderian, one-time Chief of General Staff and famous for his exploits as a tank commander, uses these arguments to justify his refusal to cooperate with the German underground and his acceptance of a leading position in the Nazi army after July 20, 1944. Stressing his role as a defender of Europe against unspeakable horrors, he maintains that he had no alternative but to fight to the finish as long as the Western powers continued to insist upon unconditional surrender in the East as well as in the West. He even attacks the anti-Nazi conspirators of July 1944 for undertaking a plot for which they were ill prepared and which could only result in weakening the German defense on the Eastern front.

Thorwald and Kleist, however, also criticize Hitler and his entourage for not making sufficient use of the anti-Communist elements in the Soviet Union who welcomed the German armies at first. Failure to exploit the enormous

potential of this opposition, they hold, was a major factor in Germany's ultimate defeat in the East. These different interpretations, however, serve only to emphasize further the contention of all three writers that Communism was a far worse evil than Nazism, and their charge that the West failed to realize this.

THIS hypothesis may be challenging and may even seem plausible today, when we are faced with Communist aggression and provocations in all parts of the world. But at the time of the outbreak of World War II the most immediate and conspicuous threat to peace, security, and the established order came from Berlin, not Moscow. In spite of the "Führer's" belief in German racial superiority and his known desire to extend German power and influence over other peoples, a veritable fascist international had arisen, inspired by Berlin yet inviting the support of non-German, non-Nordic, and even some "non-Aryan" peoples. Democratic institutions had been abandoned in many places; even in distant Japan theories of Aryan supremacy had not prevented native totalitarians from joining in with Hitler. And wherever fascist or semi-fascist states had emerged, they had exhibited unmistakable pro-German tendencies. The balance of power had been tipped dangerously against the democracies.

The situation with regard to Russia was quite different. To be sure, the evil nature of the Communist regime had already become obvious. Vast blood-lettings of endless monotony and cruelty had disgusted the free world. The one-party state was as evident in Russia as in Germany. Concentration camps existed in the Soviet Union as well as in the Third Reich. But all these abuses were still confined to the country of their origin. While Hitler had extended his sway over thousands of square miles of non-German territory, Stalin had been unable to push the limits of the Communist state beyond the Russian boundaries of 1924. While Hitler had found imitators who successfully toppled parliamentary regimes in country after country, Stalin's disciples had been unable to win power in a single place outside Russia. At the very moment when the world was being amazed by the rapid development of the Wehrmacht and the thorough militarization of the Reich, the Red Army was seriously weakened by vast purges. The Communists had staked their hopes for revolution on the Great Depres-

*Jürgen Thorwald, *Wen sie verderben wollen*, Stuttgart, Steingruben Verlag, 1952, 606 pp.

Peter Kleist, *Zwischen Hitler und Stalin: 1939-45*, Bonn, Athenaum Verlag, 1950, 344 pp.

Heinz Guderian, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten*, Heidelberg, Kurt Vowinkel, 1951, 464 pp. Published in translation in the U.S. as *Panzer Leader*, Dutton, 1952, 528 pp.

sion: yet it was the fascists who were reaping the revolutionary fruits of that catastrophe.

Yet even during the Polish crisis in 1939, Great Britain and France were still so afraid of Soviet Russia that they refused to permit the Red Army to pass through non-Communist territories without the consent of the countries concerned. The Germans had no such compunctions.

Indeed—and this crucial fact is studiously ignored—it was they who unleashed the Red power by signing a non-aggression pact with Stalin, and this pact gave him his first real chance to expand westward. When Hitler attacked Poland, the Western powers had no alternative but to honor their obligations. The Nazis and Communists were bound by a treaty of friendship, and the democracies were not even given the chance to choose between them. By the time Hitler decided to break his pact with the Kremlin, he had already upset the balance of power to such an extent and had furnished such proof of the evil he intended to wreak on the world that the largely Conservative members of the British government breathed a sigh of relief when they found Russia on their side at last.

America, too, was no longer in a position to choose. Not Russia, but Japan had overrun China and was invading Southeastern Asia; nor was it Russia, but Germany which was linked to Japan by the Tripartite Pact. The Axis, not the Comintern, constituted the more immediate menace, and the United States, like Great Britain, decided to cope with the first threat first.

IN VIEW of all this, it is not surprising that the West, to say the least, took a rather dim view of Hitler's anti-Bolshevik "crusade." Once the democracies had met the German army in battle, all other considerations were subordinated to its defeat. And they felt less concern about the Communist peril to Eastern Europe than about the possibility of a rapprochement between the two totalitarian governments. Dr. Kleist's book shows that such fears were not unfounded. During trips to Sweden in 1943 this German official in Ribbentrop's service was approached several times by persons close to the Soviet embassy in an effort to sound out the possibilities of a separate peace. The negotiations failed because of Hitler's, not Stalin's, reluctance, but the possibility of their success was a factor that had to be considered by the Allies.

General Guderian's portrait of himself as a servant of Western civilization is also somewhat dimmed by these revelations. He says he did not know about Himmler's murder camps because the Nazis showed a positive "genius" in concealing them from the German public; but he must surely have known about their "standard" concentration camps. He certainly knew that wherever Hitler's power reached Jews were being arrested, imprisoned, and deported. And his own description of how he handed Brest-Litovsk over to the Soviet army in 1939 may serve as a useful reminder that it was not the West, but Germany which first enabled the Russians to Communize new provinces at a time when no one in high authority in the countries then at war with the Reich had yet thought of demanding unconditional surrender.

THORWALD believes that the Nazi leadership's great delay in forming a "free" Russian government and army under German auspices constituted one of Hitler's gravest errors. He is especially perturbed about the fate of General Andrei Vlassov, to whom he devotes the major part of his book. Vlassov went over to the Germans after a brilliant career in the Red Army that terminated with his capture by the Germans in 1942. The author deplors the Nazi government's initially unfriendly attitude toward the renegade general, but Hitler's ill will was not the only cause of Vlassov's failure. The small army the Germans eventually helped him recruit consisted of Russian prisoners of war willing to fight on the side of Nazi Germany for the "liberation" of their motherland. But these soldiers were rendered unredeemably suspect, and radically disqualified for any role as liberators, not because of errors on the part of German leadership, but simply because of the fundamental nature of the Nazi regime by which they were sponsored and protected.

What Thorwald does not sufficiently stress—though he is more aware of it than the other writers—is that Hitler never had the slightest intention of liberating Russia in the first place; it was not for that that he invaded her, and it was not a reason that he could have used to justify to the German public the cost in lives of his Russian campaign. Nor did he wish to obligate himself in any way to the Russian or non-Russian subjects of the Soviet Union by accepting their aid. He wanted to make Russia a colony (as he himself said, Germany's "In-

dia"), a source of raw materials, a reservoir of slave labor, and living space for surplus German population. His racial dogmas, according to which the Slavs were an inferior people, would have made it difficult in any case for the Nazi regime to convert Soviet subjects into dependable allies; as time went by the most that regime could do was kidnap them for forced labor. The wonder is—and it can be explained only by the intolerableness of Stalin's regime—that so many Soviet citizens actually did volunteer for service with the German armies.

Vlassov wanted to free his homeland from one tyrant with the aid of another.* But as soon as he had allied himself with the Nazis, he became an enemy of the West—and of humanity. The democracies refused to have anything to do with him, not because of their unwillingness to recognize a Russian anti-Stalinist patriot, but because of their determination not to maintain friendly contact with a Nazi general, under whatever guise he might appear. Vlassov may not have had any Nazi convictions, yet he was sponsored by Himmler and must have been aware of the consequences of such sponsorship as far as the Allies were concerned. The Russian general thought Nazism the lesser of two evils; the contrary opinion, that Stalin was the lesser, was then in the ascendancy in the West, and Vlassov had to pay the penalty. And so at the end of the war, the American army let him pass from their hands to the Soviets, who executed him as a traitor.

IN SPITE of these considerations, it may still be argued, however, that the German authors have a point. Stalinism may not be worse than Hitlerism, but it is just as bad, and America may merely have exchanged one peril for another. This line of reasoning loses sight of the fact that Roosevelt's choice of allies during the Second World War has paid dividends after all. If the United States had refused to support the Russians against the Germans, the Nazis would probably have won. Then the Axis

*Efforts on the part of captured Germans to free the Fatherland from Hitler with Russian aid offer an interesting counterpart to Vlassov's. Bismarck's grandson, Count Heinrich von Einsiedel, in his recent book, *I Joined the Russians* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1953, 306 pp.), shows how some Germans' hopes of collaboration with the Red Army ended in bitter disappointment at the hour of victory. Stalin, too, was not interested in the liberation of Germany; he intended to create a Communist satellite to serve his own purposes.

would have been supreme from Portugal to Japan. This power complex would have been so overwhelming that it might have become impossible to offer effective resistance to its inevitable further expansion. Meanwhile countless numbers would have gone on dying in Himmler's "installations" far faster than they ever would have in Malenkov's. The decision to collaborate fully with all external foes of the Hitler regime prevented the greater calamity. Although a great portion of Europe and Asia has since been overwhelmed by a Red dictatorship as sinister as the Brown, Western Europe, Southern Asia, and Japan have been saved for the free world, and possession of these areas may well prove decisive in the struggle between totalitarianism and democracy.

TAKEN as a whole, these German interpretations of recent history will probably be more popular within Germany than outside. Non-Germans will be pleased by the rejection of Hitler; they will be interested in the Wehrmacht's military experiences in Russia, but they will find it difficult to sympathize with, or even understand, the final tragedy of the non- or ex-Nazi servants of the Nazi regime. Nor will the undertone of self-pity that runs through so many German accounts of the last war strike them as warranted.

Unquestionably, horrors were visited upon the population of East Germany by the Soviet armies, but they pale in comparison with the fate of the Jews, Gypsies, and countless other people wantonly and systematically murdered by Germans. It may be pointless to compare atrocities, but outside Germany such comparisons will be difficult to avoid. Most readers are still too emotionally involved to be able to estimate the meaning of that conflict with that complete objectivity which these German authors ask for but fail to achieve themselves. What remains clear to the West is that Hitler's regime was a plague and had to be destroyed. The Soviet regime may be an equal plague, but at least we have a choice in the measures we can take against it such as Hitler did not permit us.

Still, these German books do contain elements of encouragement. The Nazis drove a formidable wedge between the mind of Germany and that of the West. The gap they created seemed at first well-nigh unbridgeable. If some German writers have succeeded in detaching themselves sufficiently from their own